



Singapore's preschool education placed 29th amongst 45 countries on the Starting Well Index

Commissioned by the Lien Foundation, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) report benchmarks early childhood education across the world

Nordic countries emerge top, with New Zealand (9th) and South Korea (10th) leading in the Asia Pacific

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1. "He who opens a school door, closes a prison," wrote Victor Hugo. Countries providing high quality preschool education inadvertently protect their future well. Looking ahead, which children in the world are likely to have a better head start in life?
2. According to the Starting Well Index that examines preschool provision across 45 countries, Nordic children enjoy the most inclusive preschool environments. Asian countries have lots of catching up to do, for only South Korea (10th) and Hong Kong (19th) made it to the top 20. The report reveals preschool weaknesses in countries respected for strengths in tertiary education. Australia (28th), Canada (26th), Singapore (29th) and the U.S (24th) are placed in lower half of the Index. Detailed results are available at www.startingwell.org.
3. The Starting Well Index assesses the extent to which governments provide a good, inclusive early childhood educational (ECE) environment for children between the ages of three and six. In particular, it considers the relative availability, affordability and quality of such preschool environments, as well as the broader social context that looks at how healthy and ready for school

children are. To accompany this data-driven research, the EIU interviewed over 60 experts around the world and studied existing research for major developments, good practices and key issues.

Premium on preschool education

4. “Governments that place a premium on preschool education practise smart economics. Research shows that preschool education is one of the most effective development tools that deliver substantial social and economic ROI (return on investment) for countries. Children are our most precious assets and we must not squander their most formative years on mediocre preschool programmes,” said Lien Foundation’s Chief Executive Officer, Mr Lee Poh Wah. “With the Index, we hope to provide insights and comparative findings on preschool education across the world that will provoke discussions and invoke improvements.”

Singapore is 6th in Asia Pacific

5. In the Starting Well study, Singapore’s performance for the categories of ‘affordability’ (21st) and ‘availability’ (25th) was average. It scored lowest in terms of ‘quality’ (30th). Some of the areas Singapore did well in were in the provision of curriculum guidelines and providing targeted subsidies for underprivileged families. Singapore also has high levels of preschool enrolment. For the ‘affordability’ factor, the report noted that the government balances Singapore’s market-led provision of preschool education - where families pay for the preschool of their choice – with direct subsidies. Most of Singapore’s weaknesses showed up in the area of ‘quality’, which includes factors like ‘student-teacher ratio’, ‘average preschool teacher wages’, ‘preschool teacher training’ and ‘linkages between preschool and primary school’. All top ten countries on the Index have ratios ranging from one teacher to five to 11 children, compared to Singapore’s 1:20 ratio.

6. Sharing her perspective on Singapore's results, Dr Khoo Kim Choo said, "While Singapore performed relatively well in terms of availability and affordability, we have a lot of catching up to do in terms of quality. In order to raise quality, we need a better teacher-child ratio as young children benefit from more individualised attention and support. We also need to attract and retain more good preschool teachers with better incentives. However, this also raises the issue of affordability on the part of the preschool providers and parents. It brings us back to the need for the government to increase its spending on preschool education - to make it affordable, available, accessible, and of good quality for all children."

Strengthening the K2 to P1 link

7. Addressing the weak link between preschool and primary school as well as the issues of quality and affordability, Dr Khoo suggested, "Kindergarten 2 could come under the Ministry of Education's wing as pre-primary classes. This will not only ensure a smoother transition to Primary 1, but most importantly, it will ensure a high standard of quality programmes that all children across the nation, regardless of income, can afford and have access to. Singapore is well known for excellence in higher education. Let that quality apply to our preschool education as well."

Lessons on Starting Well

8. According to the Index, the Nordic countries of Finland, Sweden and Norway outperform the rest largely due to their deeply embedded, sustained long-term investments and prioritisation of early childhood development in their societies. Other key drivers for quality preschool education are high teacher standards and training, curriculum guidelines and parental involvement.

Parental involvement

9. On her observation for Singapore, Professor Christine Pascal said, "In our research, we have found that parental involvement and support play a great role in children's learning. In the case of Belgium and England for example,

parents are considered a vital link between classroom learning and learning that continues at home. Belgian and English preschools recognise this and they give parents extensive support.”

10. She added, “Singapore could well consider ways to increase parental involvement by developing strategies to facilitate more dialogue and interactions between parents and children when they are at home. If you give parents the support to create a positive home learning environment, they can facilitate their child’s development and effective learning. Most of all, parents need to be aware of their critical role in supporting their child’s development and the importance of providing rich, play-based experiences at home. Besides enhancing parenting skills for all, such efforts will particularly help the less advantaged children or those with developmental delay.”

Looking ahead: Dual challenge for Singapore

11. In its bid to arrest a declining TFR (total fertility rate), Singapore faces the dual task of having to urgently ramp up new childcare centres despite chronic teacher shortages, and having to maintain and raise teaching quality at the same time. Moreover, its market-based system poses questions of how the needs of the public can be met. For instance, tension between parents and preschool providers recently escalated due to a spate of rapid fee increases. This led to the Ministry of Community Youth and Sports (MCYS) and Ministry of Education (MOE) having to step in to stipulate that preschools give advance notice of fee changes.
12. Over the last decade, the Singapore government has made several efforts to raise standards of preschool teaching and provide better curriculum guidance. Despite these efforts, Singapore’s weak performance in terms of “quality” on the Index seems to suggest that there are underlying factors that need to be examined. Mr Lee remarked, “If there is a weak link in our national education system, the preschool phase would be it. We need to ensure greater coherence in early childhood education policies and its

effective execution to reap the full benefits of significant public and private investment in this sector.”

Inclusive or elusive

13. According to experts, investing in preschool education pays well.¹ Countries can expect to reap a wide range of benefits - from better health and education outcomes to increased global competitiveness, greater social mobility and inclusiveness. However, the extent of benefits and inclusivity depends on the quality of education provided.

14. Mr Lee suggested, “Quality preschools have the proven potential to prevent educational inequity. With a widening income gap in Singapore and a system of private preschools producing disparate quality, we need to be vigilant about inequality. The ideal of equal opportunity for children in our meritocratic society should start from preschools. A better playing field would give disadvantaged children the head start that could change their life outcomes. If quality remains elusive for Singapore’s preschool education, so will the quest for inclusiveness.”

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www.lienfoundation.org

The Lien Foundation is a Singapore philanthropic house noted for its model of radical philanthropy. It breaks new ground by investing in innovative solutions, convening strategic partnerships and catalysing action on social and environmental challenges. The Foundation seeks to enhance educational opportunities for the disadvantaged, advance excellence in eldercare and promote environmental sustainability in water and sanitation.

The Starting Well Index is part of the Lien Foundation’s efforts to advocate greater access to quality early childhood education. It aims to create a better playing field by strengthening capacity in this area and opening up opportunities for disadvantaged preschoolers. The use of I.T forms a key strategy in the Foundation’s efforts to increase efficiencies and enhance professionalism in the preschool sector. The Foundation championed a community-based model of care where specialists go into mainstream preschools to help children with learning difficulties. Its success is inspiring a scaled-up national version in Singapore.

Media contacts

Genevieve Kuek
Qeren Communications
gen@qeren.biz
+65 97633110

Joanne Lee
Qeren Communications
joanne@qeren.biz
+65 90027696

¹ “The Heckman Equation”, Professor James Heckman and “Early childhood development: Economic development with a high public return”, Art Rolnick and Bob Grunewald, Dec 2003.